July 2000

Joint Assessment of MDMA Trafficking Trends

Product No. 2000-L0352-001A
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Executive Summary

MDMA (3,4-methylenedioxymethamphetamine) is a stimulant and low-level hallucinogen. During the 1980s, growing recreational use began in Europe and spread to the United States. The Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) controlled MDMA as a Schedule I drug on the Controlled Substances List in 1985 and the MDMA precursor chemicals safrole, isosafrole, and piperonal as List I regulated chemicals in 1990.

While the number of domestic MDMA laboratories has remained relatively low, traffickers in Western Europe—primarily in the Benelux countries of Belgium, the Netherlands, and Luxembourg—greatly increased production throughout the 1990s. In the Benelux countries, drug trafficking organizations (DTOs) have easy access to precursor chemicals and multimodal commercial transportation hubs to transport the MDMA to consumer countries. Seizure statistics indicate that the amount of MDMA smuggled into the United States has greatly increased through the 1990s and that the amount of MDMA smuggled in individual shipments has been increasing within the past year.

Since the mid-1990s, Israeli and Russian DTOs have dominated the importation of MDMA into the United States. The strength of these DTOs rests largely in organizational discipline and access to European commercial transportation hubs; the small number of dogs trained to detect MDMA at airports also gives them an advantage. Israeli and Russian DTOs rely on express mail services, couriers, and sea containers to smuggle MDMA from Europe to the United States.

Virtually all MDMA sold in the United States reaches the consumer through a trafficking cycle that includes production, wholesale, midlevel wholesale, and retail distribution. The wholesale level smuggles the MDMA into the United States, where it is passed to the midlevel wholesale level, which in turn passes the MDMA to retail distribution. Each level earns a considerable profit from its involvement in distribution, although currently the retail level enjoys the greatest profit margin per tablet.

Increasing emergency room mentions and seizures over the past 6 years may indicate that MDMA popularity has not peaked. The regulations on MDMA precursors in the United States should prevent the domestic production of MDMA from attaining the level of production in the Benelux countries. Based on information from DEA Special Agents, law enforcement should expect a small number of MDMA laboratories to become established in Mexico in the next 2 years and Mexican DTOs to become more involved in MDMA trafficking. Despite the strengths of MDMA trafficking organizations, the willingness of midlevel wholesale and retail distributors to sell to new and unfamiliar buyers in easily identified markets—dance clubs and college campuses—may prove to be a vulnerability.

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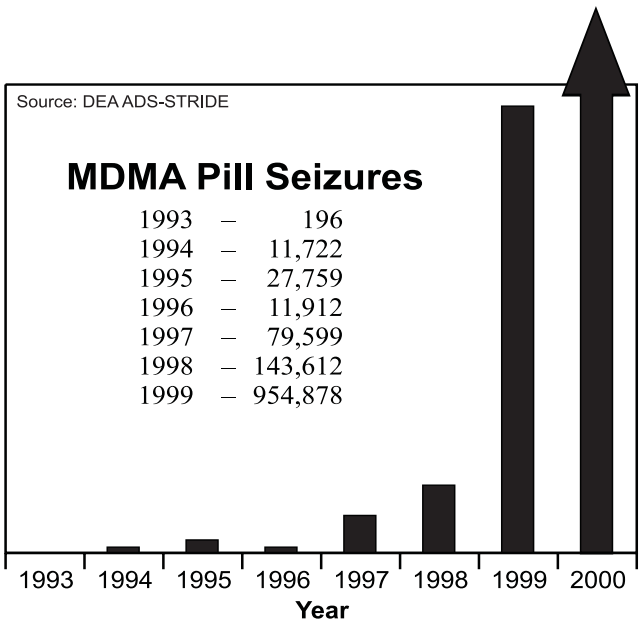
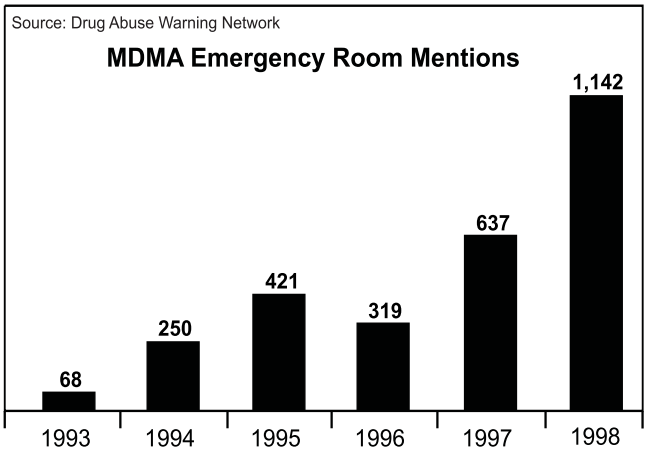
Background

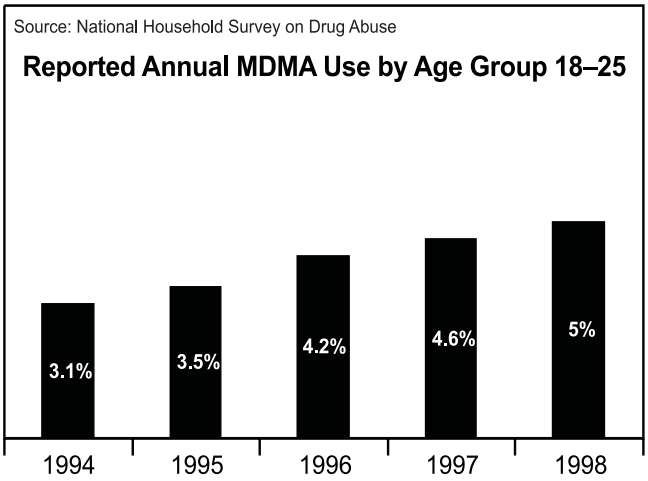
MDMA is a stimulant and has mild hallucinogenic properties. It is used primarily by high school and college-age, middle- and upper-class youths who refer to MDMA as Ecstasy, XTC, E, X, and Hug Drug. MDMA was patented in Germany in 1914 and was sometimes given to psychiatric patients through the 1970s to assist in psychotherapy—although this practice was never sanctioned by the American Psychological Association or the Food and Drug Administration. Since the 1980s, MDMA abuse increased because of its reputation for providing the user greater energy and a feeling of well-being and openness. In 1985, MDMA was placed on the Controlled Substance List as a Schedule I drug. MDMA seizures as reflected in STRIDE (System to Retrieve Information from Drug Evidence) remained relatively low until the mid-1990s when seizures sharply increased from 196 dosage units in 1993 to 954,878 in 1999. Today, it is produced in great quantities in clandestine laboratories, primarily in the Netherlands.



MDMA is commonly used at all-night dance clubs called "rave clubs," which feature hard pounding techno-music and flashing laser lights. MDMA provides users with the energy and heightened sensory perception that dancers seek in order to have a fully satisfying rave experience. Rave clubs are found in most major cities in the United States, and sponsors promote raves with flyers distributed at record shops, clothing stores, college campuses, at other rave clubs, and over the Internet. Some rave club owners cater to MDMA users by selling specialty items like sports drinks, bottled water, neon glow sticks, baby pacifiers, and nasal inhalers—all used to either enhance or manage the effects of MDMA.

According to three national surveys, as the demand for MDMA steadily increased, a significant user market developed. Drug Abuse Warning Network statistics show emergency room incidents rose from 68 in 1993 to 1,142 in 1998. The National Household Survey on Drug Abuse shows an increase in lifetime use of MDMA by almost every age group—especially the 18–25 age group, whose use increased from 3.1 percent in 1994 to 5.0 percent in 1998. Finally, the annual Monitoring the Future Study shows notable increases in both annual and 30-day use statistics for tenth and twelfth graders from 1997 to 1999. These independent studies indicate that by the



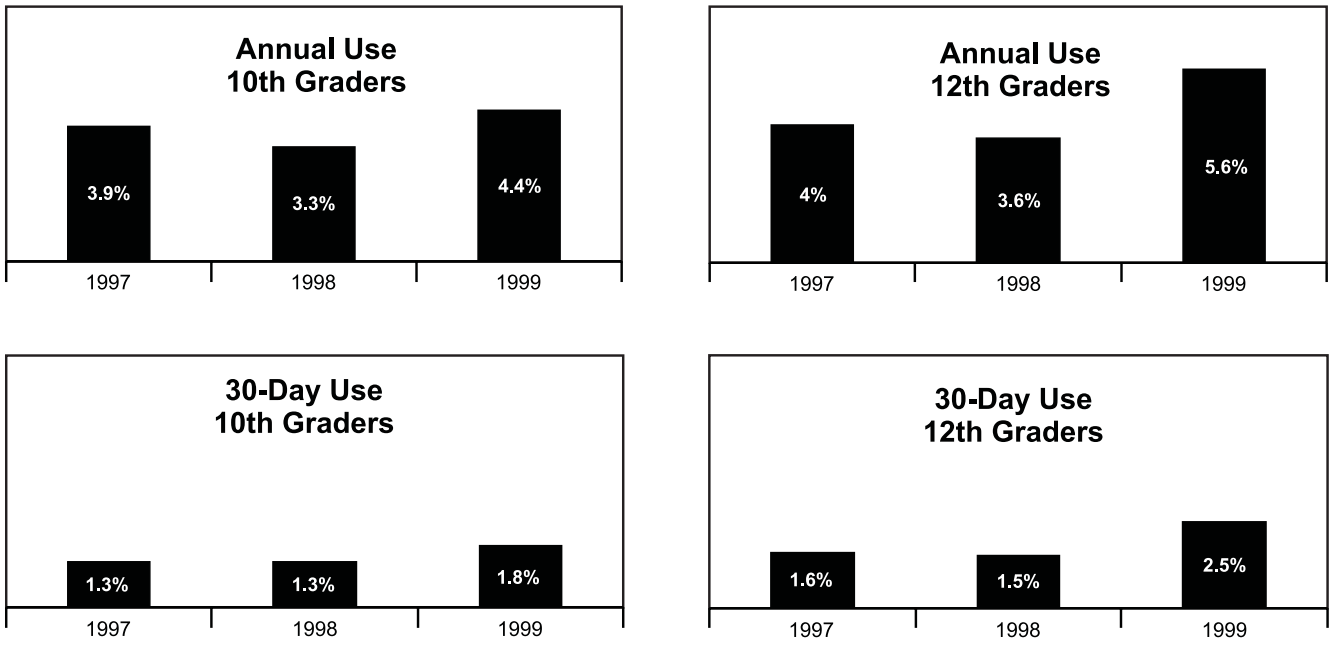


late 1990s the MDMA market had become well established in the United States, just as it had in Western Europe in the 1980s.

As the MDMA trafficking cycle became more organized from the mid- to late 1990s, four basic functions emerged: production, wholesale, midlevel wholesale, and retail sales. The MDMA trafficking organizations generally engage in all functions of MDMA trafficking with the exception of production, which is usually completed by Dutch chemists. The individual organizations usually work together to keep the supply of MDMA at a sufficient level to meet demand.

Production

MDMA production is more complicated than methamphetamine production when the laboratory operators use safrole, isosafrole, or piperonal as starting methods. Although safrole (the primary constituent of sassafras oil), isosafrole, and piperonal are the three primary MDMA precursor chemicals, many production groups are able to acquire MDP2P (3,4-methylenedioxyphenyl-2-propanone), and produce



Source: Monitoring the Future Study, University of Michigan

MDMA in a simple conversion process rather than starting the process with one of the precursor chemicals. MDP2P is a commercial product made overseas and imported for use by the flavoring and fragrance industry. Groups that produce MDMA by starting with MDP2P considerably reduce production time and complexity.

Although there are more than 20 chemical recipes for MDMA production, clandestine laboratory operators commonly use only seven methods. Six of the seven common methods use either safrole or isosafrole; one uses piperonal. In the methods using safrole or isosafrole, the cook usually produces MDP2P which is then converted into the final product, MDMA. When using piperonal, an intermediate product is initially produced that is then converted into MDP2P; this is then converted into MDMA.

In a successful production process, the resulting MDMA is a nearly 100 percent pure powder with a distinctive licorice scent. The powder is pressed into pills with identifying designs or symbols. DEA estimates that over 90 percent of all MDMA smuggled into the United States is in capsule or pill form; the remainder is in powder form. MDMA powder is pressed into tablets that contain adulterants, diluents, and approximately 100 milligrams of MDMA. Although presses vary greatly in speed and quality, the best are capable of processing as much as 50 kilograms of MDMA powder into 500,000 tablets per hour. As the pills or powder dry, the odor of the solvents used in the production process diminishes to a slightly sweet scent.

According to DEA's Special Testing and Research Laboratory, the chemicals and equipment necessary to produce a single kilogram of MDMA can be purchased for as little as $500, depending on the method used and the fluctuating prices of illegally diverted precursor chemicals. DEA Special Agents in the Netherlands and Germany report that most MDMA production organizations are able to produce MDMA for as little as 20–25 cents per pill. These pills are then sold to a wholesale group for approximately $1 to $2 per pill.

Throughout the 1990s, production of MDMA in the United States remained relatively low according to the DEA, while production groups in many other countries greatly increased their output. Although clandestine laboratories have been seized in Africa, Asia, North America, and South America, Western Europe is now recognized as the primary source of the world's MDMA. Driven primarily by the availability of precursor and essential chemicals and international multimodal commercial transportation hubs, most of the large, well-organized MDMA production groups have established operations in rural regions of the Benelux countries—Belgium, the Netherlands, and Luxembourg.

MDMA Production

Source	European groups usually based in the Netherlands
Level of processing difficulty	Multistage process requiring a full laboratory setup
Cook proficiency	Typically requires some laboratory experience
Precursor and essential chemicals used	Safrole/isosafrole, MDP2P (3,4-methylenedioxyphenyl-2-propanone), methylamine, piperonal
Availability of chemicals	Regulated List I chemicals
Domestic laboratories seized	Usually fewer than 12 laboratories seized by federal law enforcement each year
Final product	90% tablets or capsules 10% powder

During most of the 1980s, illicit domestic production of MDMA was able to meet the low demand of the U.S. user population. As the drug gained in popularity in the late 1980s and the number of domestic MDMA laboratories increased, the United States regulated MDMA's primary precursor chemicals, safrole, isosafrole, and piperonal as List I regulated chemicals in 1990, making it illegal to purchase or possess these chemicals without a permit. After the regulation of these precursors, the number of laboratory seizures dropped to approximately 10–12 each year throughout the 1990s. Although most of the domestic laboratories seized were relatively small, some were capable of significant production. For example, one laboratory seized in Westport, Massachusetts, in 1998 could have produced up to 25 pounds of MDMA with the amount of chemicals seized. In addition, an MDMA laboratory seized in October 1999 outside Vancouver, British Columbia, was the largest MDMA laboratory ever seized in North America, which raised concerns

MDMA Precursor Chemicals

Precursor Chemicals	Hazards	Form	Process	Comments
Safrole			Purification requires acetic acid and ethanol	Many MDMA production groups begin the process with safrole, an extract from sassafras oil
acetic acid	Corrosive to tissue	Liquid		
ethanol	Flammable, toxic	Liquid		
Isosafrole			Isomerized from safrole using strong bases such as potassium hydroxide and calcium oxide	
potassium hydroxide	Caustic	Solid or liquid		
calcium oxide	Caustic	Solid		
10% hydrochloric acid (muriatic acid)	Corrosive	Liquid		Used to wash away impurities
Piperonal	Flammable, toxic	Powder or liquid	Conversion of piperonal to 3,4 MDP2P and then to MDMA (does not use any form of safrole)	Yield will be around 50% pure
Bromosafrole				
Safrole	Corrosive	Liquid		
66% hydrobromic acid	Corrosive	Liquid		
sulfuric acid	Readily absorbed	Liquid		
DMSO				
MDP2P			Conversion of safrole to MDP2P using sulfuric acid, sodium hydroxide, and solvents; conversion from isosafrole using hydrogen peroxide and formic acid results in reduced yields	Most common route for production of MDMA; palladium bromide catalyst method results in higher yields
sulfuric acid	Corrosive	Liquid		
sodium hydroxide	Caustic (lye)	Liquid or solid		
dichloromethane	Flammable, toxic, carcinogen (solvent)	Liquid		

Note: MDMA can be made with any of the precursor chemicals listed in the Precursor Chemicals column. The essential chemicals listed under each precursor often are used with that precursor chemical in the cooking process.

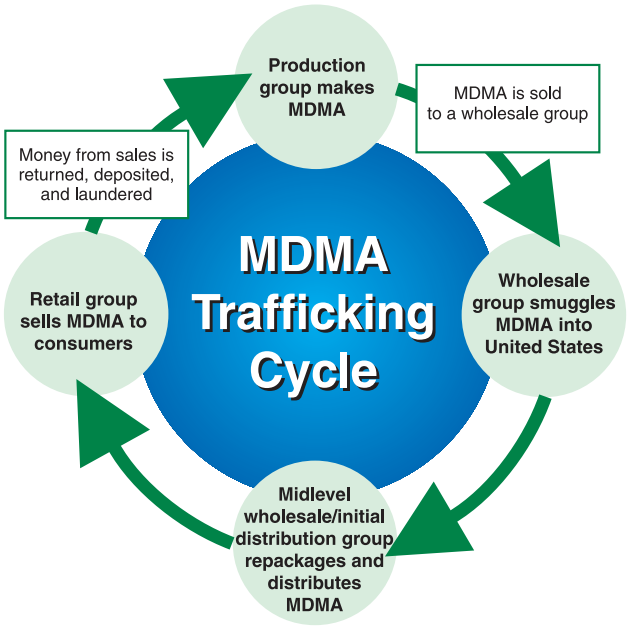
by Canadian authorities regarding a possible increase in MDMA production in Canada.

Clandestine laboratories in rural areas of the Netherlands and Belgium now produce approximately 80 percent of the MDMA consumed worldwide, according to DEA estimates. Laboratories are also located in Australia, Canada, Germany, Luxembourg, and Eastern European countries such as the Czech Republic, Hungary, Latvia, and Poland.

The Benelux region is attractive to clandestine drug manufacturers and has become the center of MDMA production largely because of well-established precursor chemical routes and easy access to international air and rail transportation hubs. According to the DEA Office of Diversion Control, the most common MDMA precursor chemicals—safrole, isosafrole, MDP2P, and piperonal—are produced in China, India, Poland, and Germany. DEA case information shows that in the late 1980s methamphetamine production organizations established ephedrine smuggling routes to move bulk shipments of ephedrine from chemical plants in China, India, Poland, and Germany through the Netherlands and on to North America. Those established chemical supply routes through the Netherlands were still in use as recently as 1996, when MDMA production in the Netherlands was rapidly increasing. Today, MDMA production groups may be capitalizing on those existing chemical supply routes to move MDMA precursor chemicals from China, India, Poland, and Germany into the Netherlands. MDMA production groups supplying users throughout Europe, Canada, and the United States are most effective in areas that offer high-volume commercial transportation to major market areas. The Netherlands and Belgium, because of their multiple air, sea, and rail connections to countries throughout Europe and to the United States, are ideal locations for moving MDMA to markets.

DTOs in countries other than the Benelux countries now appear to be developing an MDMA production capability. Analysts and Special Agents at DEA's Special Operations Division who watch for emerging trends in MDMA production warn that recent, first-time MDMA laboratory seizures in China and Colombia and methamphetamine production in Mexico during the 1990s mark traffickers in these countries as potential sources of supply. In contrast to some other countries where MDMA laboratories have been discovered, China, Colombia, and Mexico offer advantages similar to those of the Netherlands and Belgium: access to international multimodal (air, sea, and rail) transportation and established precursor chemical supplies. If DTOs exploit these advantages, the production dominance of traffickers in Belgium and the Netherlands could be challenged.

As MDMA popularity increased in the 1990s, a distinctive division of labor evolved. Groups have specialized in acquiring precursor chemicals, producing MDMA powder, pressing powder into pills, or smuggling MDMA into consumer countries. It appears that no single organization currently controls all aspects of production, wholesale, midlevel wholesale, or retail sales. Today, the wholesale groups smuggling MDMA into the United States usually pass the pills on to separate midlevel wholesale distribution groups that in turn pass them to retail-level distributors.



Wholesale

Once MDMA is produced, it is usually pressed into pills and packaged immediately for transfer to a wholesale group that will smuggle the MDMA to other countries including the United States. Since the mid-1990s, Israeli and Russian DTOs have dominated MDMA smuggling to the United States, although some small U.S. organizations have established their own sources of supply in Europe and are smuggling the balance.

Israeli and Russian DTOs

Israeli and Russian DTOs are closely associated and often cooperate with one another. Many of the Russian traffickers immigrated to Israel both before and after the fall of the Soviet Union, and now many of the Israeli-Russian traffickers have acquired U.S. citizenship. Israeli and Russian traffickers are often young, well educated, and very disciplined, although there are some who are career criminals with violent records. Often Israeli drug traffickers have known each other and developed a network of personal associations from their time served in mandatory military service.

Israeli and Russian DTOs use similar smuggling and concealment techniques, using couriers, express mail services, and sea containers. A review of DEA investigations dating back to 1997 shows that Israeli and Russian DTOs have established MDMA importation hubs in Los Angeles, Miami, New York City, Philadelphia, and Washington, D.C. Both the Israeli and Russian DTOs have developed a working relationship in the smuggling of MDMA to the United States.

As Israeli and Russian DTOs move MDMA from Europe to U.S. hub cities and secondary midlevel wholesale distribution areas, they also move bulk cash back to the hub cities and smuggle a portion of the money back to Europe. One courier recruited by Israeli traffickers reported seeing stacks of cash from the United States in safe houses in Belgium to be used as operating capital for additional pill purchases and expenses for European operations. Other couriers have reported that as pills are smuggled into the United States, money is smuggled simultaneously to Europe.

Smuggling Methods

Mail Services: Smugglers commonly use express mail services to deliver pills quickly to customers in the United States. When shipping pills through a mail service, smugglers often put loose pills inside jigsaw puzzles to avoid x-ray detection. Groups will ship pills anonymously to mailbox rental facilities.

Couriers: Most smuggling organizations prefer using couriers to carry MDMA on commercial flights into the United States. Israeli and Russian DTOs prefer using female couriers traveling on round-trip tickets, usually purchased with cash approximately 4 days before the flight. The couriers conceal the pills in false-bottomed, carry-on luggage.

Maritime: Maritime MDMA smuggling seems to be rare; however, it does occur. A Russian DTO used container ships to transport packages of pills hidden inside luxury cars shipped from Amsterdam directly to New York or sometimes through Montreal.

Express Mail

DEA analysts believe that smuggling MDMA into the United States through express mail services may now be the most popular method among both Israeli and Russian wholesale organizations. Express mail services have been increasingly used because of the relative security afforded the organization. DTOs commonly ship packages of MDMA directly from Europe to a recipient in the United States using a false name, which allows the recipient to deny knowledge of the contents of the package. The DTOs are able to track the shipment through each stage of the shipping process by accessing the express mail service's Internet site and entering the package tracking number. If the package is stopped for an abnormal period of time at any stage, the DTO will detect it and assume that authorities discovered the MDMA in the package and held it in order to obtain a search warrant or to coordinate a controlled delivery. The DTO will then abandon the package and avoid detection.

Couriers

Many Israeli and Russian DTOs employ couriers who primarily take direct flights from departure hubs in Europe—usually Amsterdam, Berlin, Bonn, Brussels, Dusseldorf, Madrid, and Paris—although they occasionally take indirect flights through Canada, Israel, Spain, and Mexico en route to the United States. They prefer to use females, believing they draw less attention from law enforcement although they also routinely use males and individuals of various cultural and ethnic groups. An increasing number of independent Dominican couriers are now smuggling MDMA from European departure hubs to the Dominican Republic and then into Miami or New York.

DEA case reporting shows that Israeli DTOs often have a member responsible not only for recruiting couriers, but also for coaching them through each stage of the smuggling operation. The recruiter often will obtain false identification or driver's licenses for couriers and purchase round-trip tickets—with cash and usually within 4 days of the travel. A trip often will include a 2- to 4-day layover in Europe, where the courier will stay in a hotel paid for by the DTO before returning to the United States with the MDMA pills. Israeli recruiters have tried to reduce the risk to couriers by observing airport security procedures, especially at check-in and baggage pickup areas. Some Israeli DTOs have conducted as many as seven "dry runs" for new couriers to ensure they are able to operate calmly and successfully.

Israeli and Russian DTOs are disciplined in operational security and ensure that their couriers follow a well-established smuggling pattern. DEA case reporting shows that couriers for Israeli and Russian DTOs usually are paid $1 per pill smuggled and normally carry at least 10,000 pills on each trip. The pills most often are concealed in false-bottomed, soft-sided, carry-on luggage. Couriers generally know very little about the people from whom they receive the pills in Europe or the people to whom they deliver the pills in the United States. After the courier arrives in a hub distribution city, Israeli DTOs sometimes direct the courier to a safe house rented by the organization. There, an organization member contacts the courier and either takes possession of the pills or directs the courier to another city. Eventually, the courier turns the pills over to the wholesale group, which delivers the pills to regular midlevel wholesale customers in the hub city and in other cities around the United States.

Sea Containers

Although the number of MDMA smuggling cases involving sea containers is relatively low, DEA expects this number to grow as the wholesale organizations become more sophisticated. The increased pressure on couriers combined with the ability to smuggle large shipments of MDMA in sea containers will likely make this option more appealing to the large, well organized Israeli and Russian groups.

Domestic DTOs

Driven by the increasing demand for MDMA, the number of domestic DTOs appears to be rising. They are small groups independent of Israeli and Russian DTOs and unaffiliated with any particular ethnic group. Based in Chicago, Phoenix, Florida, Texas, and other areas, they have established their own sources of supply in Europe.

Couriers are often members of the DTO and because they are smuggling for their own organization or for themselves, they usually do not receive payment for their courier services. Less organized and disciplined than the Israeli and Russian DTOs, domestic DTOs are more likely to take greater risks during smuggling operations. They often move more pills in a single trip than can be concealed easily or use checked baggage instead of carry-on luggage. Furthermore, they are as likely to conceal the pills on their body by taping bags of pills to their legs or torso as they are to conceal the pills in luggage.

DEA reporting indicates that cocaine is sometimes purchased in the United States by domestic DTOs and transported to Europe where it is exchanged for MDMA. One reported instance involved an exchange of one kilogram of cocaine for 13,000 MDMA pills.

Distribution

The wholesale group transfers the MDMA to a midlevel wholesale distribution group in the United States. The midlevel wholesale group then distributes the MDMA to several retail distribution groups or individuals. With some other drugs, successive "cutting" at each level of distribution allows those at each level to make a profit. Since MDMA pills are pressed before entering the distribution system, there is little opportunity to dilute them with cutting agents, thus reducing the number of potential distribution levels at the midlevel wholesale or retail level.

Midlevel Wholesale

The midlevel wholesale distribution group plays the traditional role of connecting the wholesale group with the retail group. Midlevel wholesale distribution groups typically receive at least 1,000 pills at a time from their supplier. However, some groups receive as much as 30 to 100 pounds (almost 500,000 pills) in a single purchase, and the trend toward larger midlevel wholesale deliveries is increasing. U.S. Customs Service statistics indicate an increase in shipment sizes, with record-setting seizures of MDMA in the United States over the past several months.

Recent MDMA Seizures

Amount Seized (lb)	Date Seized	Smuggling Method	Location	Smuggling Group
38	03/06/00	Courier	Miami, FL	Dutch
700	12/24/99	Mail service	San Bernardino, CA	U.S.
72	12/21/99	Courier	Houston, TX	U.S.
121	12/21/99	Mail service	Upland, CA	U.S.
20	10/22/99	Courier	Newark, NJ	Dutch
27	08/28/99	Courier	Orlando, FL	Dutch

Source: U.S. Customs Service

Retail

Most groups involved in retail distribution today are independent and entrepreneurial—taking advantage of a growing market and high profit margins. Most retail groups are based in the United States. Although they usually are not controlled by Israeli or Russian DTOs, retail groups do sometimes get their supplies from Israeli and Russian DTOs and sometimes sell pills to customers at Russian-owned dance clubs in the United States. Retail distributors maintain consistent distribution patterns, selling at the same dance clubs on specific nights and typically receiving fewer than 1,000–2,000 pills at a time from their supplier.

Retail distributors currently earn very high profits—a strong incentive for individuals to become involved in retail MDMA distribution. With an expanding market, willing individuals are able to earn tremendous profits with little effort. Each MDMA pill sold at the retail level can net the distributor $10 to $30 in profits. Individual distributors have stated that they can sell as many as 1,000 pills a night at dance clubs since many users buy several pills over the course of a night.

Strengths

The high level of structure and discipline within Israeli and Russian DTOs, which smuggle much of the MDMA consumed in the United States, is a strength noted by law enforcement experts. Members of these DTOs show a strong respect for their leaders and a willingness to take and follow orders. Members also show a dedication to their assigned positions and an adherence to safeguards that greatly reduce the smuggling profile, including active surveillance, recruitment of female couriers, use of false identification and rented safe houses for couriers, and rigidly structured flight and hotel itineraries.

Extensive European rail and air transportation systems aid wholesale groups in quickly moving MDMA out of the Benelux countries to transportation hub cities, where it is then shipped directly to the United States.

Packaging MDMA pills in small quantities makes detection more difficult.

Drug detection dogs frequently are not trained to alert to the presence of MDMA. Statements by smugglers confirm that they are aware of this deficiency and have little fear of detection by dogs at airports or train stations. The U.S. Customs Service recently began training canines in MDMA detection and completed training on the first class of 13 canines in mid-March. With proper placement, trained dogs can identify packages, forcing wholesale organizations to dramatically alter smuggling methods.

MDMA trafficking organizations have been very successful at concealing the flow of money back to Europe. Although investigations have revealed DTO investment in real estate and business in the United States, law enforcement is still unsure of their methods of laundering MDMA proceeds.

Vulnerabilities

MDMA DTOs, despite their strengths, are vulnerable to enforcement action. Although it would be difficult to dismantle the entire MDMA trafficking system, often individual groups that make up the system are easy to target and dismantle, especially at the midlevel wholesale and retail levels.

Both midlevel wholesale and retail distribution groups appear willing to sell to new buyers without much hesitation. This eagerness to sell to unfamiliar customers makes them especially vulnerable to traditional buy–bust operations from which information can be gathered for larger investigations.

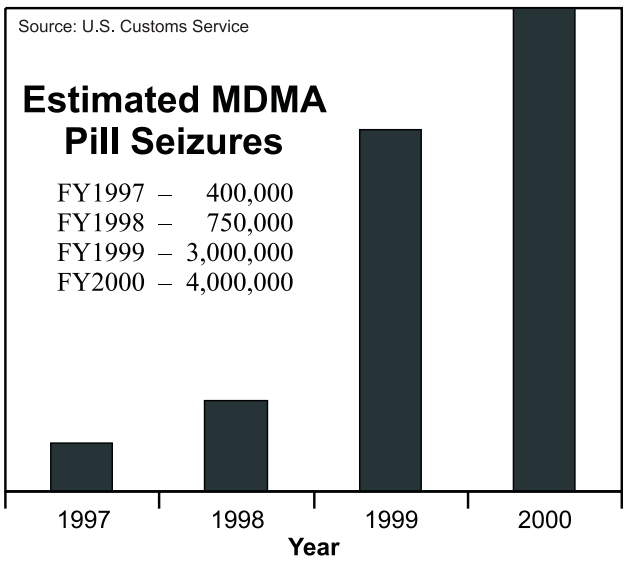
MDMA is most often sold in rave clubs and on college campuses—easily identified market areas where investigations could be launched.

If U.S. law enforcement has greater success seizing MDMA at airports and mail service hubs, DTOs likely will increase sea container smuggling.

Beyond the vulnerabilities MDMA trafficking organizations face from targeted investigations and trained dogs, they soon may face an increased threat from the judicial system. Current penalties for MDMA trafficking offenses vary greatly from state to state, and federal penalties have lagged far behind the drug's increased threat. Recently DEA proposed increased penalties for MDMA trafficking offenses, making them comparable to current methamphetamine penalties. This increase might serve as a stronger deterrent to traffickers and keep many repeat MDMA offenders in prison for longer periods.

Outlook

Greatly increased emergency room mentions over the past 6 years, as well as a corresponding increase in MDMA pill seizures over the same period, strongly indicate that MDMA is still growing in popularity. If current trends hold—with emergency room mentions roughly doubling and pill seizures dramatically increasing each year—the national MDMA threat would begin to approach that of methamphetamine by 2002–2003.



There is little indication that domestic MDMA production will expand much beyond the small number of low-production laboratories discovered each year in the United States. The requisite chemistry background and the difficulty

in acquiring precursor and essential chemicals, combined with the current overflow of pills from Europe, make domestic production risky, less profitable, and difficult for most people to accomplish. The overwhelming advantages enjoyed by production groups in the Netherlands and Belgium suggest that, for the near term, the vast majority of MDMA production will continue to be centered in the Benelux region—regardless of the level of demand in the United States or the accessibility to MDMA recipes on the Internet.

Law enforcement has become very concerned with the possibility of highly skilled, unemployed Russian and Eastern European chemists becoming involved in large-scale MDMA production.

Perhaps the greatest intelligence gap regarding the future of MDMA in the United States is the potential for DTOs from Mexico, Colombia, or China to become involved in production and trafficking. Although no organizations from these countries have made strong moves toward large-scale MDMA production, the same advantages found in the Netherlands—access to chemicals and to smuggling routes to the United States—are present and sometimes more prevalent in Mexico, Colombia, and China.

As seen with methamphetamine, Mexican DTOs have an ability to produce synthetic drugs and distribute them on a massive scale. The tremendous profit and relatively low threat associated with MDMA production and trafficking could entice Mexican and Colombian DTOs to enter the MDMA market. Mexican DTOs are probably the greater threat because of their experience in producing and distributing amphetamine and methamphetamine. A small supply of Mexican MDMA in western states and the establishment of a small number of Mexico-based laboratories should be expected within the next 2 years.

The seizure of two MDMA laboratories in China last year suggests that some Chinese trafficking organizations may become involved with MDMA trafficking. However, current information does not indicate whether MDMA production in China will increase.